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ABSTRACT

A study examined the concerns, problems, and experiences when teachers change from a traditional skills classroom to a whole language classroom. Subjects, 162 of 400 K-12 teachers from several Ohio Teachers Applying Whole Language groups, responded to a questionnaire (for a return rate of 40%). Results indicated that: (1) the most important reasons for changing were that teachers had read the literature about whole language theory and had been influenced to change because they had talked with other teachers about whole language; (2) the most difficult problem teachers faced when changing was the lack of books and other materials to support the change; (3) 55% of teachers changed gradually from skills to whole language, 19% changed all at once; (4) the most frequent change reported was implementing writing workshops and/or writing journals; (5) many teachers still used basal readers because they were required to or because teachers in the district used basals; and (6) most of the support teachers received came from other teachers. Findings suggest the following guidelines for teachers' thinking about changing and/or teachers who are in the process of change: learn about whole language theory and practice before changing; anticipate the problems to be faced; recognize that change is gradual; and be aware of the need for support. (RS)

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Gordon S. Anderson

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CS011289

Gordon S. Anderson

A Survey of Teacher's Transition from Skills to Whole Language

Teachers have been leading a grass-roots movement to restructure the school curriculum called whole language. Whole language has been described as a philosophy, a perspective, or beliefs teachers hold about language learning, thinking, and language use. (Flores, Altwerger and Edelsky, 1991).

A whole language perspective views students as capable learners with language strengths, experiences and interests who learn and use language naturally in social, personal, functional, and meaningful contexts. Whole language practice involves students in authentic reading, writing, speaking and listening events: In whole language classrooms teachers and students transact meaning in collaborative social contexts.

Many teachers are changing from a traditional skills transmission model of teaching and learning to a transactional whole language curriculum. A whole language curriculum empowers teachers and students to construct personal meaning rather than a curriculum prescribed externally.

Survey Description

A survey was conducted to describe concerns, problems and experiences when teachers change from a traditional skills classroom to a whole language classroom.

Teachers responded to eleven questions with several forced choices. Teachers could respond to as many choices applied to their situation. They could add other responses and were encouraged to write comments.

Below is an example of one question and choices teachers could respond to.

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Question: Why did you change from skills to whole language?

---Read literature about whole language theory, research and practice.

---Talked with whole language teachers.

---Observed whole language teachers.

---Dissatisfied teaching skills, basal reader.

---Students were apathetic, bored with skills, basal reader.

---I intuitively knew students learned holistically through real reading and writing.

Other_____

Comments_____

Survey Procedures

The names and addresses of teachers were obtained from several Ohio TAWL (Teachers Applying Whole Language) groups. Four hundred questionnaires were mailed to teachers during October, 1991 and 162 questionnaires, or 40%, were returned.

The responses to questions were tabulated and comments were recorded. Percentages of responses to each question were calculated. A sampling of teachers' comments and responses were analyzed and conclusions were drawn from the data. Implications and recommendations have been made from the conclusions.

Teacher Population

The teachers responding to the questionnaire ranged in experience from first year teachers to teachers with more than 30 years experience. Most of the teachers were primary (K-3), a smaller number of teachers taught grades 4-8, and fewer teachers taught grades 9-12.

The teachers taught in school districts in southwestern andcentral Ohio, in Dayton, Ohio area schools, Eaton, Ohio, and Columbus, Ohio area schools.

Survey Results

The responses of teachers to four questions are reported to determine the nature of teacher change from skills to whole language.

1. Why did you change from skills to whole language?
2. What problems did/do you encounter applying whole language in your classroom?
3. How did you change from skills to whole language?
4. What support did you receive to cope with changing from skills to whole language?

Question 1: Why did you change from skills to whole language? .

85% read literature about whole language theory, research and practice.

84% talked with whole language teachers.

61% intuitively knew reading and writing are learned holistically.

60% were dissatisfied with teaching skills, basal readers, workbooks and worksheets.

55% said students are apathetic, bored with skills and basal readers.

54% observed whole language teachers.

47% attended TAWL meetings.

32% said their principal encouraged and supported whole language.

Teacher Comments

The comments are representative of many comments given by teachers.

"A university class (on whole language) pushed me over the edge. I had been dissatisfied with teaching grammar and skills. I'd used some trade books with my classes and I loved it! I'd done

research on process writing during my master's program."

"I read Nanci Atwell's, In The Middle, after reading articles in The English Journal, etc. I had also discussed whole language with teachers who were using whole language in their classes."

"I was bored. I was trying to do units, plays, etc., and still do workbooks and all. It was tiring and students didn't seem to get much out of basals. I could remember when I was in school the days we had silent reading and put on plays. I never remembered workbooks, dittos and basals."

"The transition (from skills to whole language) came gradually. We used a basal but we did not use all of it. We supplemented with a wide variety of materials."

Question 2: What problems did/do you encounter applying whole language in your classroom?

Teachers responded to eight problems found to be common problems for teachers changing from skills to whole language. The frequency of responses are given in percentages below:

62% lack books, literature, materials and supplies.

49% lack classroom space for activities, storage and display.

49% feel pressure to test skills on traditional tests.

42% lack time - too many interruptions during class time.

17% feel pressure from other teachers who teach skills.

13% feel pressure from parents to teach skills.

5% feel pressure from principal, administrators to teach skills.

Teacher Comments

The comments below are representative of teachers' responses:

1) lack of books, literature, materials and supplies

"I have been purchasing my own materials for quite awhile. I am also figuring out and discovering where and how I can get more

materials without having to purchase my own materials. This has been very expensive."

"I was able to use monies from PTO and district to purchase sets of books and smaller sets of individual titles."

2) lack of time and planning time

"Preparation time was a problem. It takes so much time to prepare units. It really helps when you find teachers willing to share together what they have worked on."

"I find the greatest difficulty in planning. I think this "method" requires a wealth of resources. I don't know how a beginning teacher could have the resources at her disposal. I want to use all the disciplines, and for instance, math doesn't fit into all literature books. Also, science has to be taught and books have to be found to fit the concepts."

3) lack classroom space for activities, storage and display

"Our class size is 29. Too large to be as effective as I would like to be but it hasn't stopped me from using whole language."

4) Pressure due to state and district requirements

"The biggest struggle is standardized test requirements. We are required to give basal reader tests in reading. I was apprehensive at first, however, my students are doing well."

"I felt extreme pressure from the district with regard to standardized tests. I feel test-driven."

Question 3: How did you begin to change from skills to whole language?

The percentage of responses to each choice is given below:

55% began to change gradually, still using basal readers, workbooks, and worksheets.

19% changed all at once - no basal readers, workbooks, or worksheets.

73% added writing workshop

73% began using writing journals.

63% added sustained silent reading or reading workshop.

63% began using thematic units.

64% used literature-based activities, art, music and dramatics.

46% began using shared book experience, i.e., big books.

43% included sharing time, i.e., author's chair, reader's chair.

21% added whole language learning centers.

Teacher Comments

The comments below are representative of most teacher comments:

1) How I began to change: all at once or gradually

"I began with reading and writing workshops and included units also."

"I feel this transition will take a number of years before I am totally whole language."

"I would like to add more once I feel I can handle what I'm attempting."

"I did reading workshop, writing workshop, thematic units, journal writing and literature-based activities, starting with writing journals. THis year there was an abrupt transition to literature. I have been gradually preparing for nine years."

"I began slowly. I continued to use basals until last year. I now use literature and writing to teach reading. No longer use basals. This year I'm working on integrating math with my themes. My themes center on my science and social studies objective."

2) Use of basals required.

"This is my first year I have attempted to move away from my basal readers. Because my school system uses basals I feel I still have to use it also, so I supplement with trade books (at my expense."

"I use basal stories. It is all I have to choose from for reading materials. I have abandoned the phonics and skill practice workbooks. The handwriting workbook is no longer used. Each child keeps a reading journal as well as a daily writing journal."

"I use basals twice weekly and occasionally worksheets. Already was using writing journals."

"Already was using SSR, thematic units and learning centers. I still use basal but no workbooks or worksheets. But I use basals because it's a common book they all have and because they can carry it home easily and share their reading skills. The children are easily bored with basals. Next year I hope I won't have to use it at all."

3) I use a combination of basals and whole language approaches.

"I incorporate basal readers into themes if appropriate but no workbooks used."

"Already using writing journals. The first year I began the change I used basals, workbooks and worksheets. This year I use basals and selected worksheets. I've cut down on phonic drills and worksheets."

"Already was using sustained silent reading, thematic units, and learning centers. I still use basals but no workbooks or worksheets."

4) Other comments

"Now I do writing workshop, journal writing, reading workshop, thematic units, literature-based activities, shared book experience, sharing time and learning centers, but I started doing all the approaches the year I became a whole language teacher."

Question 4: What support did you receive to cope with changing from skills to whole language?

The percentage of responses to each choice is given below:

75% had support from teachers in their building/district.

57% had support from the principal/administration and/or school board.

52% received support through additional materials, books, supplies and equipment made available.

27% had support from parents.

27% did not have to use tests, i.e., basal reader tests, standardized tests.

Teacher Comments

1) Support from teachers

"The support from teachers was by far the most beneficial."

"Lots of support. My teammates were supportive and willing to try my ideas and also remained faithful to many of them."

"Teachers have shared books."

2) Support from principal, administration and/or school board

"Our principal has encouraged all of us to become more whole language. She has been able to talk our PTO into giving us more money than ever before."

"The principal gave no support. I was told by the principal to use the basals. Finally, with a change in principal we transitioned into a whole language school."

"Our administration is progressive and was very supportive."

"Administrators seem to know the least about whole language."

3) Support from additional books, materials, supplies and equipment

"The money students paid in fees for workbooks was used to purchase books for the room. This policy took a couple of years to get in place."

"Our PTO is very supportive and we are able to purchase a lot of new materials each year."

"I lack the volume of literature I would need to abandon the basal. No support for purchasing alternative materials."

"No funding. I have bought all my own materials. I use the public library."

"Getting materials and books took lots of work on my part. There are still things I need but we are able to add materials each year. I had to go before the school board. I am considered a "pilot program". I have received some help and support but it hasn't been easy."

4) Support from parents

"My parents are very supportive. They can't believe what their first graders are reading!"

"Some support from parents."

"This year at the orientation meeting I actually had parents who had heard of whole language and were excited that their child would be involved in such a program. I've received numerous notes from them as well. They are pleased with their child's progress so early."

"Although the parents in my district are very economically and educationally poor they have been very supportive and eager to be introduced to the whole language approach."

5) Support from other sources

"All teachers met throughout the summer to plan their programs. This was all voluntary. Parent volunteers help with learning centers."

"Workshops and TAWL groups provide support."

"Still have to give standardized tests."

"Still have to use basal reader tests."

"Didn't have to use some tests."

"There has been no real support, particularly in the beginning. This has been a district that "pushed" mastery teaching very heavily. Only recently has the trend begun to change a bit. Mastery learning is not so vocally stressed but whole language is not really encouraged either."

"Reading everything I can get my hands on and talking to the very few people I know who were applying whole language in their classrooms in other districts."

Conclusions and Implications

The survey, in addition to other questions, addressed four fundamental questions about teacher transition from skills to whole language: Why did you change?, what problems did you have changing?, and who did you change?, and what support did you have to change?

Conclusions

The conclusions were drawn from teachers responses to the forced choices given as percentages and teachers added comments to explain their choices.

The most important reasons teachers gave for changing was because they had read the literature about whole language and had been

influenced to change because they had talked with other teachers about whole language. Many teachers were influenced to change because they had attended whole language workshops, conferences, and had taken university courses emphasizing whole language.

The most difficult problem teachers faced when changing was the lack of books and other materials which was cited as support needed to change. Other problems included the lack of time in the classroom, and planning time, lack of space, and testing. Some teachers stated they had to buy their own books and materials and some received funds to purchase materials and books from the PTO. Many teachers described the need for many materials to change to whole language. Several teachers, both in their forced choice response and comments, described the pressure from the state and district to give required tests as a barrier to change.

The data showed that by a 3:1 ratio teachers changed gradually from skills to whole language rather than an abrupt "all at once" change. Some teachers said their transition would take several years. Most teachers explained they made more changes in their classrooms when they felt comfortable with what they had already changed.

The most frequent change reported was implementing writing workshop and/or writing journals. The next most frequent changes were adding more time for students to read, i.e., SSR or reading workshop and thematic units, and literature based activities.

As teachers added whole language components, many stated they still used basal readers because they were required or the teachers in the district used basals. Most teaches said they combined basal readers with whole language appoaches although some teachers explained

they used workbooks and worksheets selectively, or not at all.

Most of the support teachers received came from other teachers which was a primary reason teachers changed in the first place. This finding confirms the notion that whole language has been a grass-roots movement at the classroom level rather than an administrative edict common to other innovations. However, many teachers responded they received support from their principal. One way teachers supported each other was because they shared planning, materials, and talked with each other. Moreover, a large percentage of teachers responding to forced choices and comments said they devoted lots of work and time obtaining books and materials and purchasing books from personal funds. An area teachers felt they lacked support was the pressure to give traditional tests required by the state and/or district. This was also described frequently as a problem inhibiting change.

Implications

The results from this survey provide guidelines for other teachers interested in making the transition from a skills classroom to a whole language classroom. Teachers can learn from other teachers' experiences who have been involved in the change process.

The decision to change, the problems encountered during change, ways to change the classroom in terms of methods, procedures, materials and classroom organization and the support needed to change, are interrelated.

The results from this survey identify guidelines for teachers thinking about changing and/or who are in the process of change.

First, before you decide to change learn about whole language theory and practice by reading the literature, talk with whole language

teachers (observe their classrooms if possible), and attend whole language workshops, conferences, enroll in university courses that focus on whole language. If possible join a whole language support group in your area.

Second, teachers need to anticipate problems they will likely face. There is a need for many more materials, especially children and adolescents' literature. Try to persuade your principal and district to purchase books rather than workbooks, worksheets and basal readers. Teachers need to be aware of the problem traditional tests cause and be ready to deal with the pressure to test skills.

Third, recognize that for best results, change is gradual. Plan on your transition over several years. Try approaches such as writing workshop and/or reading workshop first and monitor the process. Then you might try organizing thematic units or try relating literature-based activities to books you read aloud to students and books students read.

Fourth, you need to be aware of the need for support. The most important support needed is from the principal and other teachers in your school and district. Also, you will need support through the acquisition of more books for students to read, i.e., trade books, big books (primary grades), predictable books, picture books, wordless books, and writing materials. Before you change, you need to gain the support from parents, informing them about your curriculum.

References

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